

A Needs Assessment: Language Instruction Stakeholders Engaging in Project Based  
Learning Outside the Classroom for Effective Strategic Problem Solving

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## Abstract

A noted benefit of Project Based Learning (PBL) as a teaching strategy is how it engages the student and enhances learning outcomes as a result of working through challenges intended to depict dilemmas outside the classroom. PBL has seldom been applied outside the parameters of the classroom curriculum. The current needs assessment carried out in this research project examined current practices of language instruction and International Administrative Professionals of both the private and public Language Industry. Participants responded to survey questions on their current administrative practices, strategies, and program characteristics. The study investigated the usefulness of a handbook on the procedure of assisting administrative service teams in language instruction settings to an engaged approach to PBL for student service issues. The diverse opinions, beliefs, and ideas, along with institutional policy, can provide beneficial framework ideas for future tools.

## Acknowledgements

To my children, Mackenzie, Zachary and Sebastian, thank you for being my inspiration in life. I would “joke” about returning to school when they hit their own post-secondary education. The joke stopped when it became reality. They always kept it real and challenged me to find balance. One of the most difficult things for me to do is take time away from them, but the result was always a positive one, bringing new information and ideas that kept the dinner conversation lively and enlightening (at least, this is my perception). Thank you, Todd, for being supportive. You had a way of holding me to task and encouraged me to be selfish with my time to do my work. To Professor Kompf, our talks always left me believing that, “I think I can, I think I can”, despite how overwhelmed I might have been feeling before our meetings. You always asked the right questions and organized my mind, so that I could get down to business and make the next deadline. To Andrew, your guidance and comments gave me new insight and I much appreciate the clarity you provided in doing so. To Sandra, my “Study-Buddy”, who without I would never have embarked on this journey, so thank you! To Geeta, who generously shared her experience and wisdom, to provide guidance and did so in such a positive light. To Vanessa who put me on the right path and asked the tough questions that kept me on it. To all those who humoured me and listened to me reason out loud, whatever it was I was working through. To all those who inspired me to “get it done” and provided light and encouragement when I had run out of both. A most heart-felt thank you, to each and every one of you!

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

The goal of this research project is to predetermine, through needs assessment, the efficacy of administrators, students, and staff working together in a useful approach to plan and execute effective problem solving outcomes through project based learning. Due to diverse international populations that come together in language instruction settings, those who administer programs may encounter difficulties when negotiating policies or creating solutions to complex problems.

Many may find it difficult to establish consensus among all parties and this can prove to be a painstaking experience. A useful and effective approach to finding strategic and effective solutions can increase efficacy and productivity in the workplace. When suitable parameters are in place through easy to follow steps the likelihood of reaching group consensus is increased. It becomes even more important for programs to have steps in place for administrative tasks, in order to best manage programs with diverse populations that have grown large quickly.

Administration and staff can expend a great deal of time and effort problem solving. Without engaging the student in the plan they may misinterpret the problem and come up with ineffective solutions. Engaging stakeholders in a language program setting to work together strategically is a desired outcome for forward-thinking administrators. Engaging stakeholders allows for the sharing of responsibility and ownership of the solutions. Those responsible for effective solutions will be motivated to improve systems that make their job easier.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem in this study is to predetermine, through needs assessment, the efficacy of administrators, students, and staff working together in a useful approach to plan and execute effective problem solving outcomes through project based learning. A positive outcome of this type of plan and execution is student engagement. Dating back to the late nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties, much attention is given to the idea of student engagement. Student engagement, according to Skinner, is explained below:

Student Engagement includes both behavioral and emotional components...those who are engaged show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest. The opposite of engagement is *disaffection*. Disaffected children are passive, do not try hard and give up easily in the face of challenges. Disaffected children can be bored, depressed, anxious, or even angry about their presence in the classroom; they can be withdrawn from learning opportunities or even rebellious toward teachers and classmates (1993, p. 2).

The research states that a student who engages in their academic work becomes more focused and knowledgeable about the content. The literature suggests that the student feels more competent and this raises his/her self-esteem and level of confidence, thus increasing their feeling of belonging and accomplishment (Skinner, 1993). The more



engaged a student is in his/her academic life, the more successful he/she is overall. The same can be said for his/her involvement in activities outside the classroom. Striking a balance between academic and socio-cultural participation can lead to even further student engagement within their institution of higher education. Research exists on the relationship between student engagement and greater student retention as one topic example suggested by research.

If student engagement has proven to be the desired standard of academic achievement, then the same may apply for engagement of participants with any project or authentic project that is undertaken. Larmer and Mergendoller say the following about authentic material:

A project can be authentic in four ways, some of which may be combined in one project:

1. The project meets a real need in the world beyond the classroom, or the products that students create are used by real people.
2. The project focuses on a problem, issue or topic that is relevant to students' lives -- the more directly, the better -- or on a problem or issue that is actually being faced by adults in the world students will soon enter.
3. The project sets up a scenario or simulation that is realistic, even if it is fictitious.
4. The project involves tools, tasks or processes used by adults in real settings and by professionals in the workplace. (This criterion for authenticity could apply to any of the above examples of projects.) (2010, p. 36)

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this needs assessment project is to analyse the data from a needs assessment given to administrative professionals of language programs who are responsible for student services. The feedback will indicate the usefulness of developing a handbook as a tool for these administrators to use to assist administration in coordinating teams of faculty, administration, students, and staff to collaborate strategically in order to solve, through PBL, otherwise frustrating issues. Collaboration among these teams from various backgrounds can prove to be an invaluable educational approach with long lasting, positive benefits for all participants.

### **Project Objectives**

Do language program professionals see a need for a concise, efficient strategy, outlined in an easy to use handbook, to assist with a team approach for project based learning to solve complex issues faced by the program?

### **Rationale**

This needs assessment study can provide insight about the usefulness of a step by step handbook to be used by administrators to create teams comprised of faculty, administration, students, and staff in project-based learning groups with the objective to provide viable solutions to complicated student service related issues. By understanding the rationale for engaging these teams, a representation of many viewpoints and thus far-reaching solutions can prove to produce more effective solutions to complex issues. This type of team approach can provide a very valuable outcome for all involved with respect to levels of satisfaction, connectedness to the institution, overall engagement with work and school, and retention of both students and employees.

For the purpose of this needs assessment study, there is a lack of information directly related to projects worked on by students outside the classroom. This is why a needs assessment has been sent to a number of language instruction professionals across Canada. The use of such a team based approach can authenticate the work done by students outside the classroom.

### **Project Rationale**

This study is to assess the usefulness for administrators to effectively plan and execute teams comprised of members of the student service team and language learners to take part in project based learning for the creation of strategic, effective problem solving, resulting in participant engagement outside the classroom. This outcome can prove to be beneficial on many levels, including retention at the student and employee level.

### **Definitions of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined throughout the project: Project Based Learning (PBL), Student Engagement, Authentic material, and Student Retention.

### **Scope and Delimitations of the Project**

This study will review the literature that supports team strategy involving language instruction stakeholders to engage in project-based learning for effective solutions to real institutional issues. The notion of engagement in a PBL approach and problem solving of complicated issues involving members of the student service team and language learners (students) can be beneficial, according to what some of the research suggests. The research will decide the usefulness of developing a step by step

handbook to be used as a tool to help administrators engage teams in creative, strategic problem solving using a project based learning approach, outside the classroom, for administrative purposes.

Chapters 2 through 5 will discuss the literature review, methodology, results and discussion and conclusion, respectively.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

It is important to understand the history and background of PBL to fully comprehend project based learning and its value as a teaching method and potentially an administrative tool used in solving complex student service-related problems. This literature review will begin with a discussion of constructivist and socio-constructivist perspectives and describe how PBL fits within these frameworks and later will examine more closely the characteristics of PBL. The start of the chapter will discuss the constructivist and socio-constructivist reasoning for implementing PBL in the classroom.

### **Constructivist Theory**

Incorporated into Wilson's belief in constructivism is the idea that in order to bring clarity to instruction, the definition of what constitutes instruction is needed. He defines instruction as the place resources and meaningful solutions are derived. The addition of "constructivist" explains the relevance of "meaningful, authentic activities that help the learner to construct understandings and develop skills relevant to solving problems" (Wilson, 1996, p. 3). In other words, constructivism involves "learning by doing", which is a concept that dates back to Confucius and Aristotle. Boss indicates the concept of "questioning, inquiry, and critical thinking – all strategies that remain very relevant in today's PBL classrooms, although described early on by Socrates" (Boss, 2011, p. 1).

Others are also credited for laying the foundation of constructivism and later, in the form of PBL. Maria Montessori, "demonstrated that: early childhood learning took place not by listening to works but by experiences upon the environment" (Boss, 2011, p. 1); Jean Piaget

helped us understand how we make meaning from our experiences at different ages. His insights laid the foundation for the constructivist approach to education in which students build on what they know by asking questions, investigating, interacting with others, and reflecting on these experiences (Boss, 2011, p. 1).

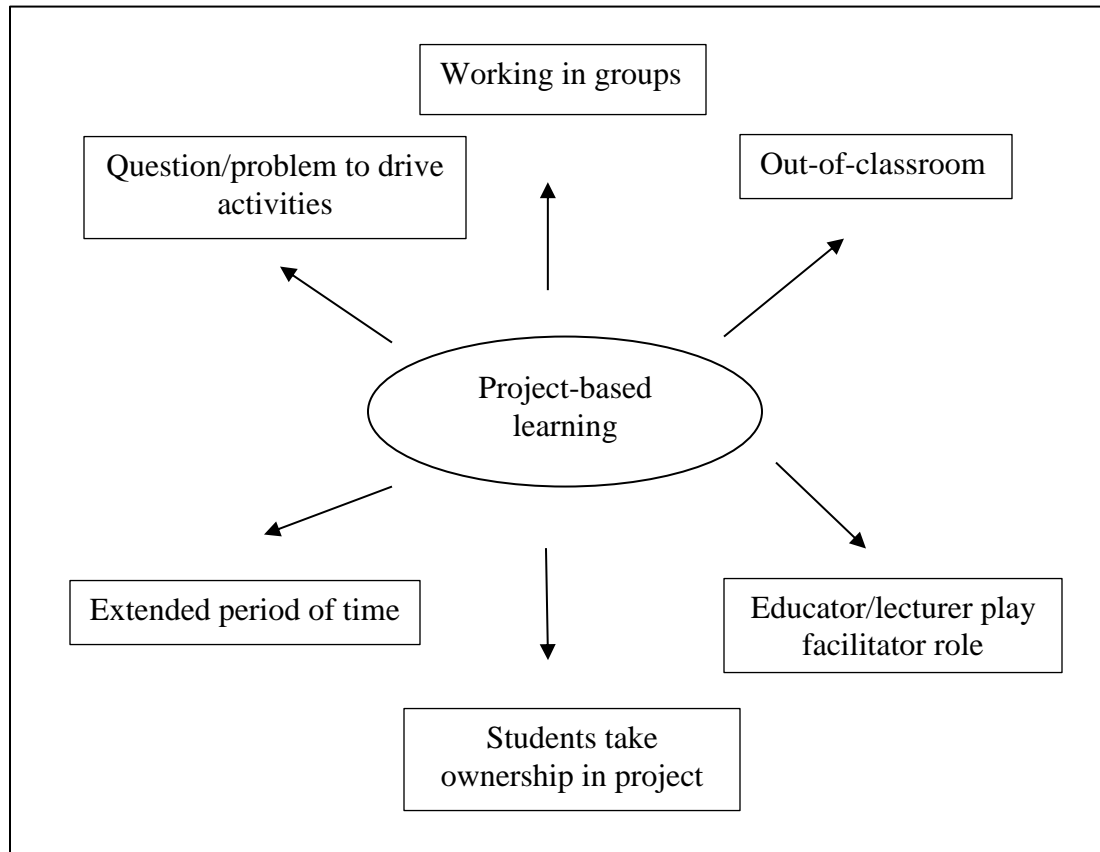
Figure 1 is an illustration of what components make up project-based learning, according to Botha.

A criticism of constructivism's in-person interaction suggests that although it allows for an exchange of ideas and enhances understanding, "there are limitations around a customization of course content to reflect learners' skills. As well, students' nervousness or shyness and time constraints also affect the outcome of this process." The suggestion of Al-Huneidi is that a blended method of constructivism and conversation theories accommodate for the deficiencies in constructivism as the sole method, as noted above (Al-Huneidi, 2012, p. 5). Another point to consider is that the language learner would find this method unfamiliar and odd.

Further literature on constructivism suggests that although some consider it to be the "grand unified theory", others consider it to be an "epistemological theory" (a theory of what knowledge is) and not a pedagogic theory, therefore, it fails to offer clarity on how students "should be taught" (Kotzee, 2010, p. 2).

### **Socio-constructivist Theory**

There is further research that expands on individual and social learning through language negotiation. Vygotskiĭ discredited cognitive theories for their lack of attention to what transpires via collaborative endeavors (Vygotskiĭ, 1978). The idea of "preconceived notions" is described as transitions, once the thought and social process of interacting



*Figure 1.* Essential components of project based learning. Adapted from “A project-based learning approach as a method of teaching entrepreneurship to a large group of undergraduate students in South Africa” by M. Botha, 2010, *Education As Change*, 14(2), pp. 213-232.

takes place, according to Vygotskiĭ. It is at this level of social interaction that higher learning is said to take place.

An example of project based learning, by Lattimer and Riordan (2011), describes the process of students making their own “Gaga pit”. This pit required them to use “live math”; by using limited resources they had to ensure that it could withstand “regular use by packs of middle schoolers”(Lattimer & Riordan, 2011, p. 20). This Gaga pit was an enclosed area that housed a game they enjoyed playing. Students were motivated and engaged in the project that was directly benefitting their extracurricular play. Students reported feeling more confident in their ability to make positive change and more motivated to take action in the future.” The article also noted the benefits students received from adult mentors. The adults assisted with setting the students up for success and providing a working plan with a “vision of what is possible when one chooses to work for change”(Lattimer & Riordan, 2011, p. 21). The article does not address the topic of what benefits, if any, were experienced by the mentoring adults.

### **Project Based Learning**

Project Based Learning is defined by Thomas as a model that uses projects as a central focus for the learning process. The projects “are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems which involve students in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities” (Thomas, 2000, p. 1). The content or assigned project requires authenticity, and teacher as facilitator. The goal of this teaching and learning method includes cooperation, reflection and incorporating the adult skills for problem solving of complex issues (Thomas, 2000).



Lattimer and Riordan warn that emphasis should always remain on the learning rather than the project element of PBL (2011). Wiggins and McTighe dub this the “activity-oriented sin of design” (2005, p.16). Teachers at High Tech Middle use the six “A’s” The six “A’s” are used as a guide to keep projects on task to accomplish meaningful learning for students and are listed as; 1) Academic rigor, 2) Authenticity, 3) Active exploration, 4) Applied learning, 5) Adult connections and 6) Assessment practices (Lattimer & Riordan, 2011, p. 14).

Subsequently, the work of Larmer and Mergendoller list the necessary project need components as; 1) Significant content, 2) A Need to Know, 3) A Driving Question, 4) Student Voice and Choice, 5) 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 6) Inquiry and Innovation, 7) Feedback and Revision and 8) Publicly Presented Product. Using a team-based approach would naturally incorporate each of these needs, ensuring project authenticity (2010, p. 36). Add to this the enriching experience of learning the cultural differences and beliefs of those participating in the team approach and the possibilities of great work are endless. Isolate the task of making a poster for a project. This task is viewed as an enlightening one, all on its own. “To create the poster, students engaged in an extended process of inquiry, critique, and revision... In short, even a poster can be meaning-heavy if it’s part of a project embodying the eight essential elements of Project Based Learning” (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010, p. 36).

### **Motivation**

According to the literature, mistakes tend to lower confidence and, in some cases, this directly lowers motivation. On the other hand, PBL can contribute to an increase in motivation as students realize the direct impact they have on their environment. They are

able to take part in activities and projects that improve their surroundings or that of others. This tends to give them a boost in confidence and raise motivation. There also appears to be a connection between “gained skill and motivation with a possible link to student attendance, attention, and engagement during the ‘non-project’ periods students spend learning basic skills” (Thomas, 2000, p. 2). As well, the students might gain added confidence as they realize their opinion is essential to the process and actually sought after and valued by faculty, staff and administrators. Diane Curtis, writes,

If schoolchildren are given the gift of exploration, society will be the beneficiary. Both in practical and in theoretical ways... ‘This is the way that mathematics started,’ notes MIT’s Seymour Papert. ‘It started not as this beautiful, pure product of the abstract mind. It started as a way of controlling the water of the Nile, building the pyramids, sailing a ship and gradually it got richer and richer’ (2011, para. 20).

### **Conceptual or Substantive Assumptions**

It is difficult to come up with effective solutions for complicated issues due to differing opinions and suggestions. This makes understanding of the issue and reaching a consensus difficult to obtain. Without input or respect for the issue, there is little regard for abiding by the solution(s). To provide the best solutions to some of the issues that pose administrative difficulties, it may be helpful to engage a number of participants in the process, of a communicative approach. This would include staff, faculty, students, administrators and members of the greater university community coming together to create solution(s). Providing parameters and enlisting teamwork, creativity, and ownership of issues will result in a better understanding of the issues, working solutions

and participant engagement, which may result in greater levels of satisfaction and even retention, as a student or employee.

In summary, the literature brings out attention to the constructivist perspective of learning by doing as a means to gain meaning through experience. The Socio-constructivist theory brings in the language component as means of negotiating what is being learned. The notion of PBL sets the stage for the project as focal point in the learning process. However, some warn about keeping the learning process as focus over the project. There is also the mention of including significant components to a project.

Furthermore, it is noted in the literature that motivation is impacted when the learner conceptualizes the connection between the work they are doing and its effect on the environment.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

This Needs Assessment study is to determine if Administrative Professionals in the Student Services area of Language Education are currently using a project based learning approach in their administrative roles. Real life solutions using the project based learning model outside the classroom can result in greater efficacy. The various perspectives of students, faculty, administrators, and staff working together provide quality solutions due to shared insight and diverse perspectives.

This needs assessment project includes past research in the review of literature based on quantitative and qualitative studies and quantitative data resulting from the needs assessment survey questionnaire of language professionals across Canada, attached as an appendix. Most of what is included in the literature review pertains to project based learning inside the classroom.

A needs assessment questionnaire is used as a method of data collection for a number of reasons. According to McCoy, the advantages are that it reaches many people in a short time; is inexpensive; presents data that can be easily summarized; and has anonymity that may encourage honesty. As for the disadvantages, they are listed as the timely development of a survey requiring skill; low and inaccurate response rates; lack of interaction for clarifying responses; the restriction of freedom of response; and results that may lead to unrealistic expectations (McCoy, 1993).

#### **Participant Description and Data Sources**

The participants of the needs assessment questionnaire were selected via a past conference list of delegates who attended a Languages Canada conference in February of 2011. Languages Canada is an organization that promotes accredited English and French

language training in Canada on a national and international level. Seventy-five surveys were randomly chosen from the list of delegates. In total, there were two attempts made to recruit participants to complete the surveys. Initially, eight were returned, yielding an 11 per cent response rate after the first round of communication. A second round of emails, followed by a dozen telephone calls, conjured up a greater number of answered questionnaires. After both communication attempts, 14 surveys in total were returned, approximately a 19 per cent response rate. The process of survey recruitment took approximately seven weeks.

### **Instrumentation**

A questionnaire comprised of 20 questions was developed and sent to language professionals across Canada. The question layout is a combination of five short answer response questions, four that require a check of provided choice questions, and 11 Likert-type scale questions checking for occurrence, importance, and satisfaction levels and requesting a rating of “not very” to “very”, for a total of 20 questions. The Likert scale questions were converted to integers of 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The surveys targeted language professionals that deal with student services. If survey results deny a need for a handbook, further research will be proven unnecessary. It is recommended that if the survey results indicate a positive outcome from survey questionnaire participants that at least one more additional method of inquiry be used to gather further data in future studies. Interviews and focus groups could be made to both administration and students to gather further insight into their understanding and opinion on the topic of project based learning and problem solving, outside the classroom, for student service related issues.

### **Procedures**

Recruitment of participants was done through email addresses from a list of delegates who attended the February 2011 Languages Canada Conference.

Approximately 75 delegates were chosen randomly from the list and sent a questionnaire and Letter of Consent. After the first point of contact, which was sent at the end of June 2012, eight replies were received. A second email reminder was sent approximately four weeks later in August 2012, and phone calls were made to 12 language professionals from the delegate list to solicit replies. The 12 telephoned were encouraged to connect with appropriate colleagues in their area who met the participant criteria and who could respond to the questionnaire. The remaining six replies were received within two weeks of the second set of completed survey questionnaires. The recruitment process of surveys took approximately seven weeks in total.

### **Analysis of Data**

This needs assessment project includes past research as listed in the literary review based on quantitative and qualitative studies and quantitative data resulting from the needs assessment survey questionnaire sent to language professionals across Canada for this project.

As for the use of the handbook, a needs assessment would indicate if theory and practice in a step by step format would be of use for practical purposes. This needs assessment will be summarized using Excel and organized by charts to display the findings and support discussion. The method of assessment used to analyse the questionnaires is “simple means”.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

The data from this needs assessment identifies a number of common opinions and strategies used by language programs. The main focus of the assessment is intended to show the usefulness of a handbook to guide administrators in leading teams in a project based learning approach to finding solutions to complex student service related issues. The idea of a PBL team approach can lead to efficacy as all members of the team provide input and thus ownership of solutions is achieved. The benefits of the diverse team can result in a more cooperative environment, thus resulting in greater enjoyment in work and school by all participants in the PBL approach.

This needs assessment articulates the satisfaction level of language administrators in student related concerns using the following criteria; successful meeting outcomes, smoking policies, meditation/prayer area/quiet space, orientation practice, student orientation, homestay program, student opinion and polling practices, activity program, and student lounge area. Each student service related item has its own separate section, according to the findings of the assessment.

There will be a chart included, where appropriate, to display the data as it correlates to the various programs according to their size. They are separated into categories of small, medium, and large-sized programs. The small programs refer to programs with student populations that range from 30 – 120. Medium-sized programs refer to those with a student population of 120 – 300. Large-sized programs refer to student populations of 300 – 600 per term.

A Needs Assessment as defined by Kaufman (1992; 1998) is that which “provide[s] a process for identifying and prioritizing gaps between current and desired

results.” The idea behind a “needs assessment”, according to Watkins (1998), is to “provide the basic data for assuring that solutions, once selected, deliver desired and useful results for internal and external customers” (p. 41). There is not complete acceptance of this decision of a “needs assessment” among those surveyed, however, “there does seem to be agreement that this approach is best suited to assist with performance improvement” (Watkins, 1998, p. 45). Therefore, the needs assessment would identify the need for an efficient means of problem solving student service related issues. The method of problem solving could be achieved through PBL.

The survey participants represent members of Languages Canada, an organization that promotes quality English and French language education nationally and internationally. Those who submitted responses to the surveys hold administrator positions in the language industry of both ESL or FSL programs and are responsible for student services as part of their portfolios. The geographic range of applicants covers the western, central and eastern parts of Canada.

The program sizes vary from 30 – 600 per term. The results were viewed according to program size: the small programs with a populations of 30 – 120, medium-sized programs with a student population of 120 – 300, large-sized programs with student populations of 300 – 600 per term. The term lengths of the programs include 2, 8, 12 and 14 week sessions. The student demographics of programs include representation from China, Japan, Korea, Egypt, Jordan, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, UAE and Vietnam.



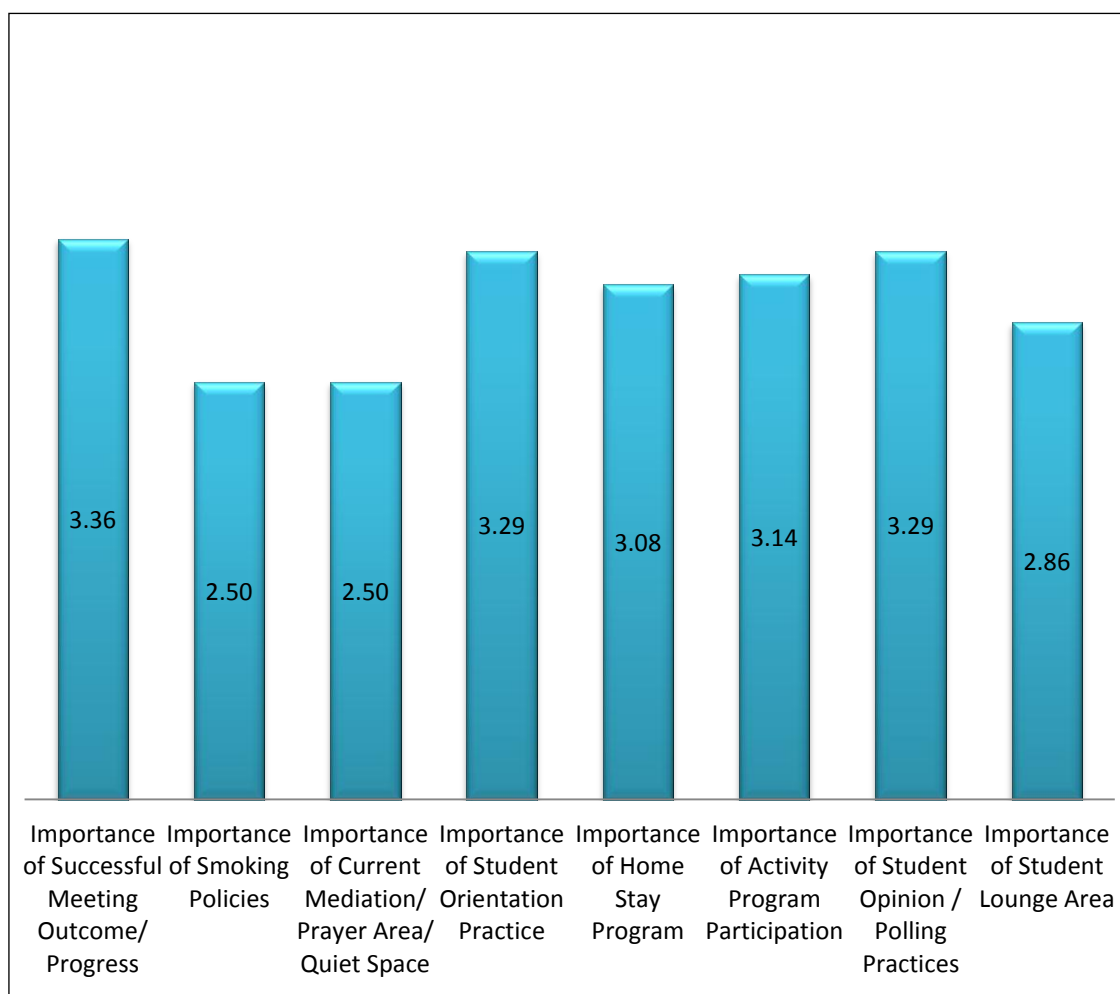
## **Findings**

The overall scoring of the data indicates a ranking of criteria, as displayed in Figure 2. Of the criteria named in the survey, “Importance of Successful Meetings” is ranked as most important, overall with an average score of 3.36/4.0. There was a tie for the next highest ranking criteria at 3.29/4.0; “Importance of Student Orientation” and “Importance of Student Opinion and Polling Practices”. The areas “Importance of Activity Program”, “Importance of Homestay Program”, and “Importance of Student Lounge Area” ranked 3.14/4.0, 3.08/4.0, and 2.86/4.0 respectively. Tied with 2.5/4.0 are “Importance of Smoking Policies” and “Importance of Current Meditation”.

The three criteria ranked most important overall are Successful Meeting Outcome and Progress, and ranked with the same importance as the second most important criteria are Student Orientation and Student Opinion and Polling Practice.

It is understandable that administrators would rank Successful Meeting Outcomes as most important. A program is only as strong as the leadership and leaders or administrators outline and prioritize agenda items and actions associated with these action plans. Without a plan, goals are difficult to meet. The benefits of a plan outline roles, responsibilities, further define goals and concepts, and assist with transparency and accountability. A plan ensures progress.

Results for Student Orientation and Student Opinion and Polling may indicate a high level of concern due to liability or risk factors associated with Student Orientation Practice. It is important to a Student Orientation Practice be thorough and effective. The onus is on the program to relay all necessary information, policies, and protocols to the student. There are codes of conduct and other important documentation that become even



*Figure 2.* Criteria ranking of importance. Criteria of a successful language education program are ranked out of four points by language administrators in student related concerns.

more challenging when presenting and ensuring comprehension for international students. Factors that complicate this process include language barriers and cultural differences for Student Orientations. This can prove challenging and worrisome for administrators, should students find themselves in serious harmful situations. The onus on the program to inform students of various diverse cultures and English language abilities can prove to be tricky and learning from students how to best meet their needs is crucial for program success. Student satisfaction is a key indicator of student retention:

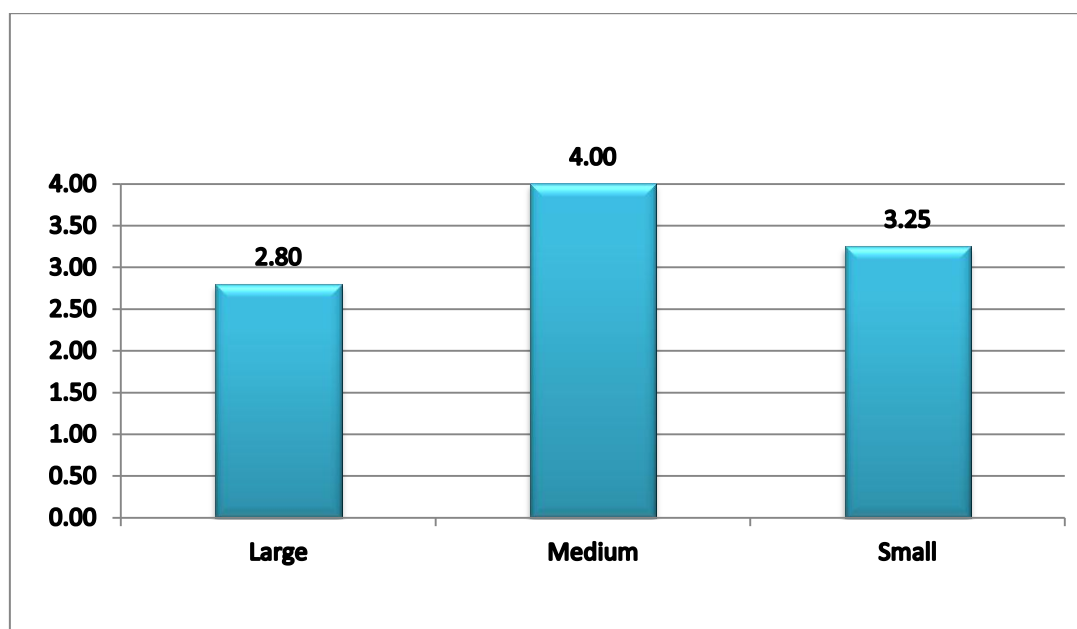
There are two extremes of student retention. *Normal progression*, typical of a *stayer*, or *retained student*, occurs when a student enrolls each semester until graduation, studies full-time, and graduates in about four years. A *dropout*, or *leaver*, is a student who enters college but leaves before graduating and never returns to that or any other school. Between these two extremes are *transfers*, students who begin studies at one institution and then transfer to another. From the student's perspective, transferring is normal progress. From the perspective of the institution where the student first enrolled, the student has dropped out. While it is easy to identify a stayer, a student who has left college could return at any time. Students who re-enroll after quitting school are called *stopouts*. Students often quit school due to a financial shortfall or a family crisis and return a year later. Other students might start school, drop out to work or to raise a family, and return years, or even decades, later. Someone defined as a dropout could become redefined as a stop out at any time. Other students become *slowdowns*, going from full-time attendance to taking just a few courses.

.... An important distinction must be made between students who meet their educational goals before graduating but do not receive a degree and students who enrolled intending to graduate but do not do so. (Net Industries, 2012, para. 3-5)

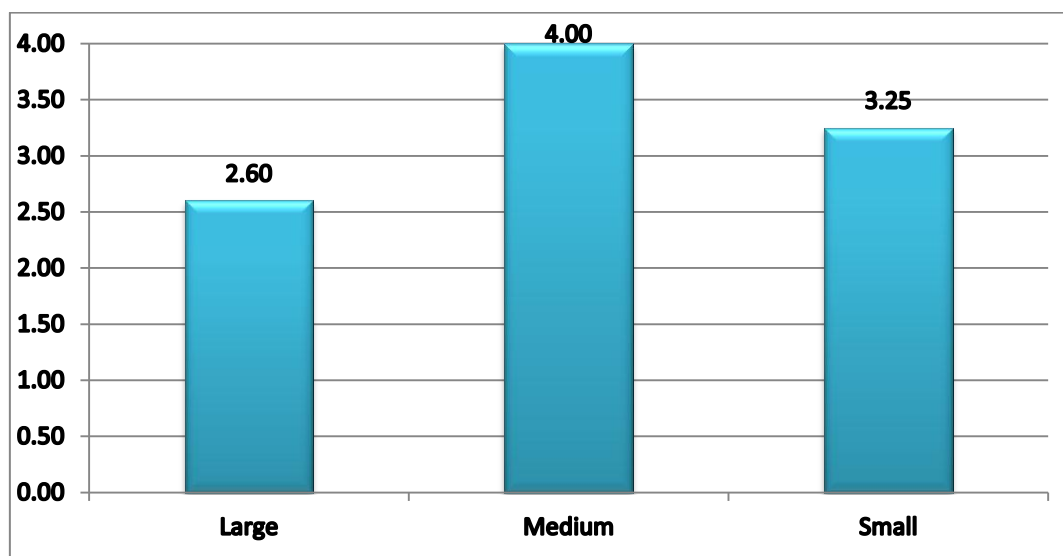
Forward thinking administrators aware of this will prioritize student opinion, in order to learn as much as possible about client satisfaction. It is important to understand the client and client needs before addressing them. It is for this reason that I believe Student Opinion and Polling Practices was ranked and tied for second.

According to program size, the data reveals that the medium-sized programs ranked each of the top three overall criteria, as noted above, as most important. As shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5 respectively, the rankings show medium-sized programs with 4.0/4.0 for Successful Meeting Outcome/Progress, 4.0/4.0 for Student Orientation Practice and 3.8/4.0 for Student Opinion and Polling. It is possible that due to quick growth in a program from small to medium-sized, policies and practices may lag. It is possible that the increase in student population creates a greater workload for all staff. Together with updating policies and procedures, deciding on priorities, adding to a quality orientation practice, and finding the time to connect with students and gather opinion data, policy and procedure review may take time as the staff “catch up” from the quick growth in student population.

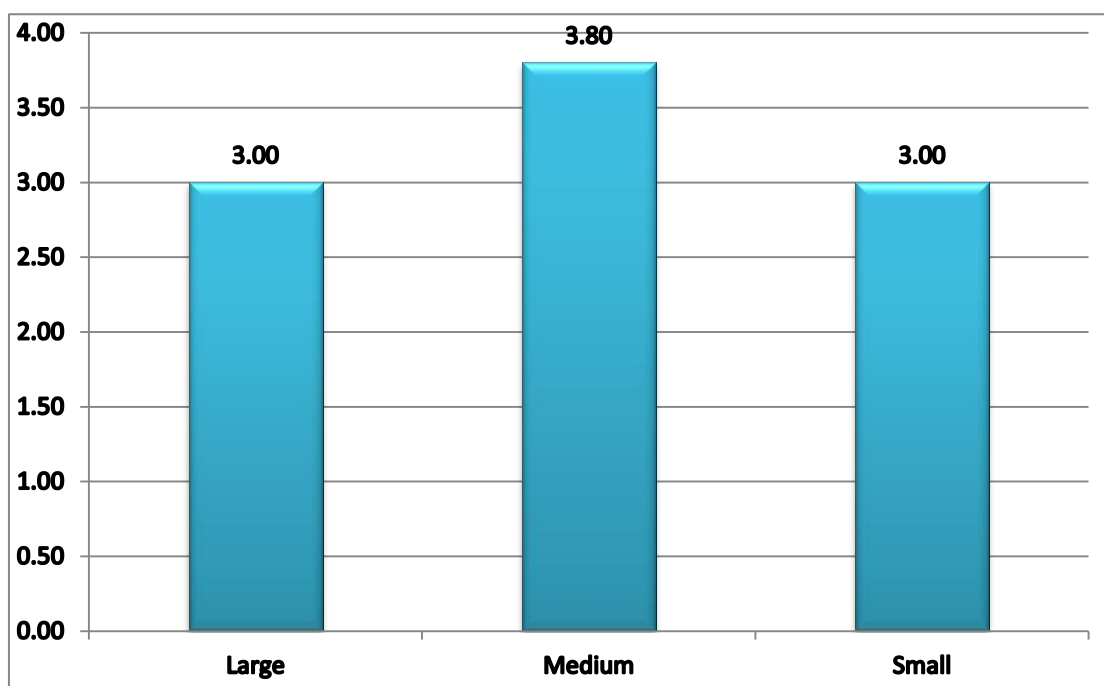
It is also interesting to note, in Figure 5, that large and small programs rated student opinion and polling practices equally important, while medium sized programs rated this slightly higher by 0.80.



*Figure 3.* Importance of successful meeting outcome/progress.



*Figure 4.* Importance of student orientation practice.



*Figure 5.* Importance of student opinion/polling practices.

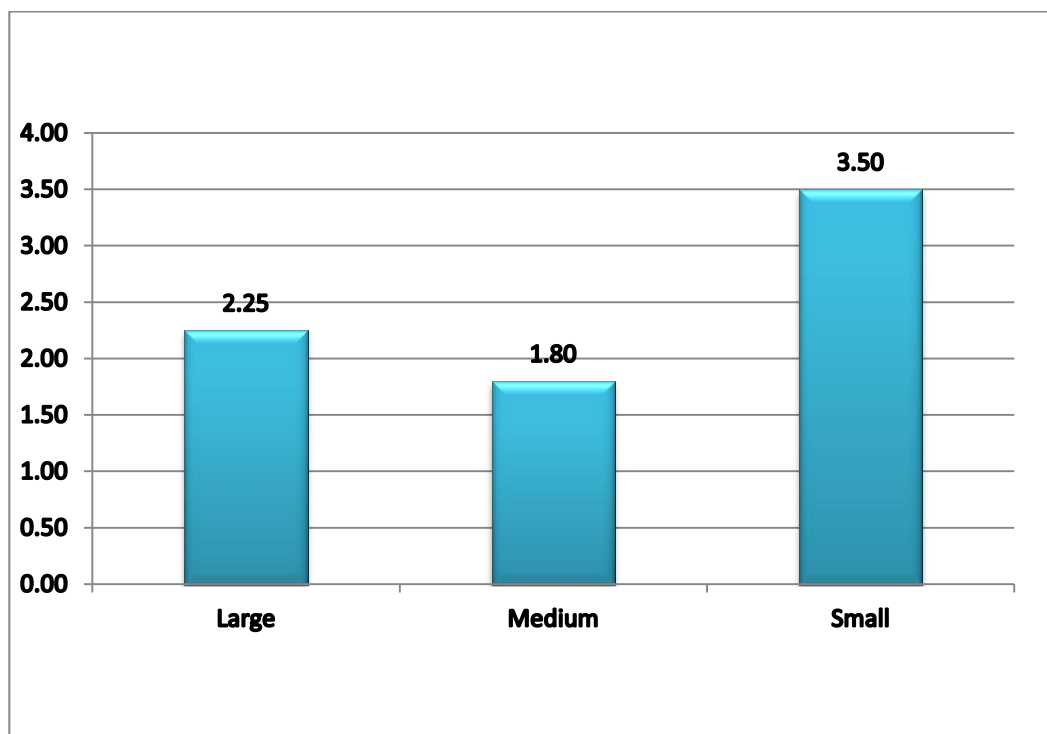
The data relays that medium-sized programs have 1.8 meetings per week, while large programs meet 2.25 times per week and small programs meet most often with 3.5 meetings per week. These findings are illustrated in Figure 6.

As Figure 7 illustrates, it appears as though the importance of meditation/prayer and quiet space are equally as important, regardless of the size of the program.

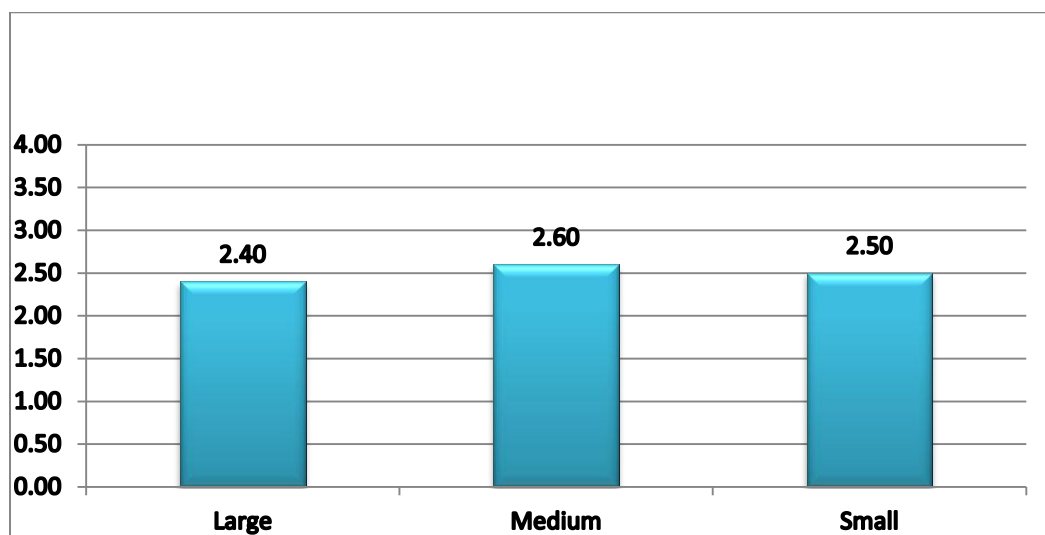
Figure 8 shows that the data reports a gradual incline for rated importance of smoking policies with small programs charting at 2.25/4.0, medium programs at 2.4/4.0 and large programs at 2.8/4.0. Overall, as shown in Figure 9, each criterion is ranked highest in medium-sized programs with the exception of Smoking Policies. The data charts large-sized programs as most important in the Smoking Policy criteria. In seven out of eight of the criteria, small programs scored second overall and large programs rated third in six out of eight criteria.

The first set of data reflects the level of importance of criteria, as indicated by each program and reported according to program size (Fig.2). The next part of the results reports on the data that reflects the level of satisfaction of criteria, as indicated by each program and reported according to program size (Fig. 10). The following chart (Fig. 9) indicates that medium sized programs scored higher than smaller sized programs in all eight categories. Medium sized programs are also scored highest in the four areas of satisfaction as listed; student lounge area, homestay program, student orientation practice and meditation/prayer space. Medium and large sized programs tie for satisfaction level of student opinion/polling practices. Large sized programs come in with the highest level of satisfaction in the areas of smoking policies and activity program participation.

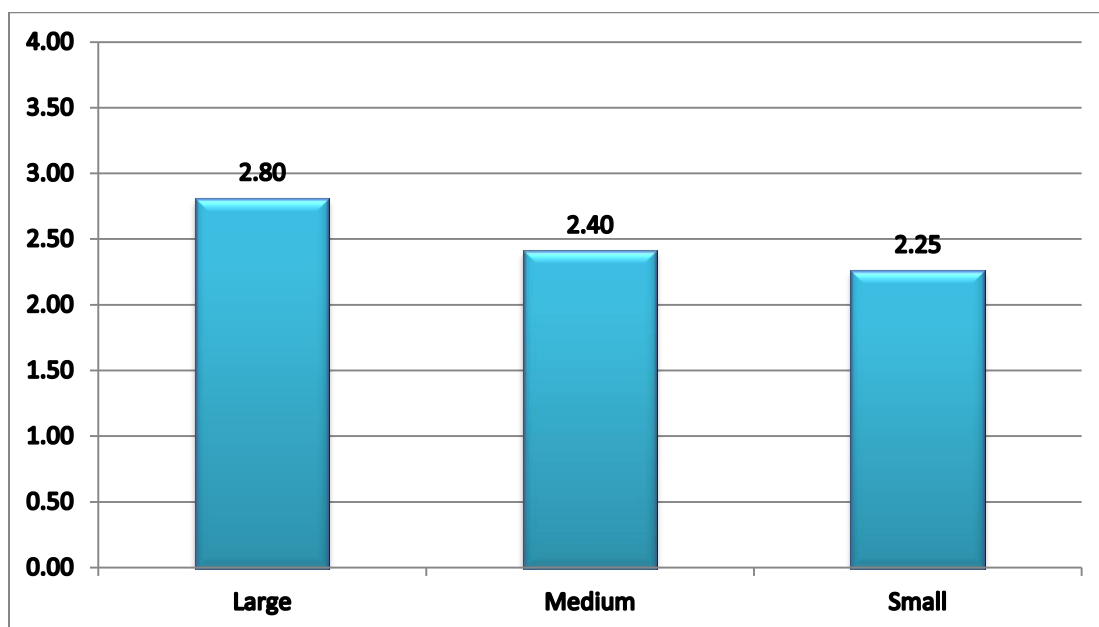




*Figure 6.* Average number of weekly meetings.



*Figure 7.* Importance of current meditation/prayer area/quiet space.



*Figure 8.* Importance of smoking policies.

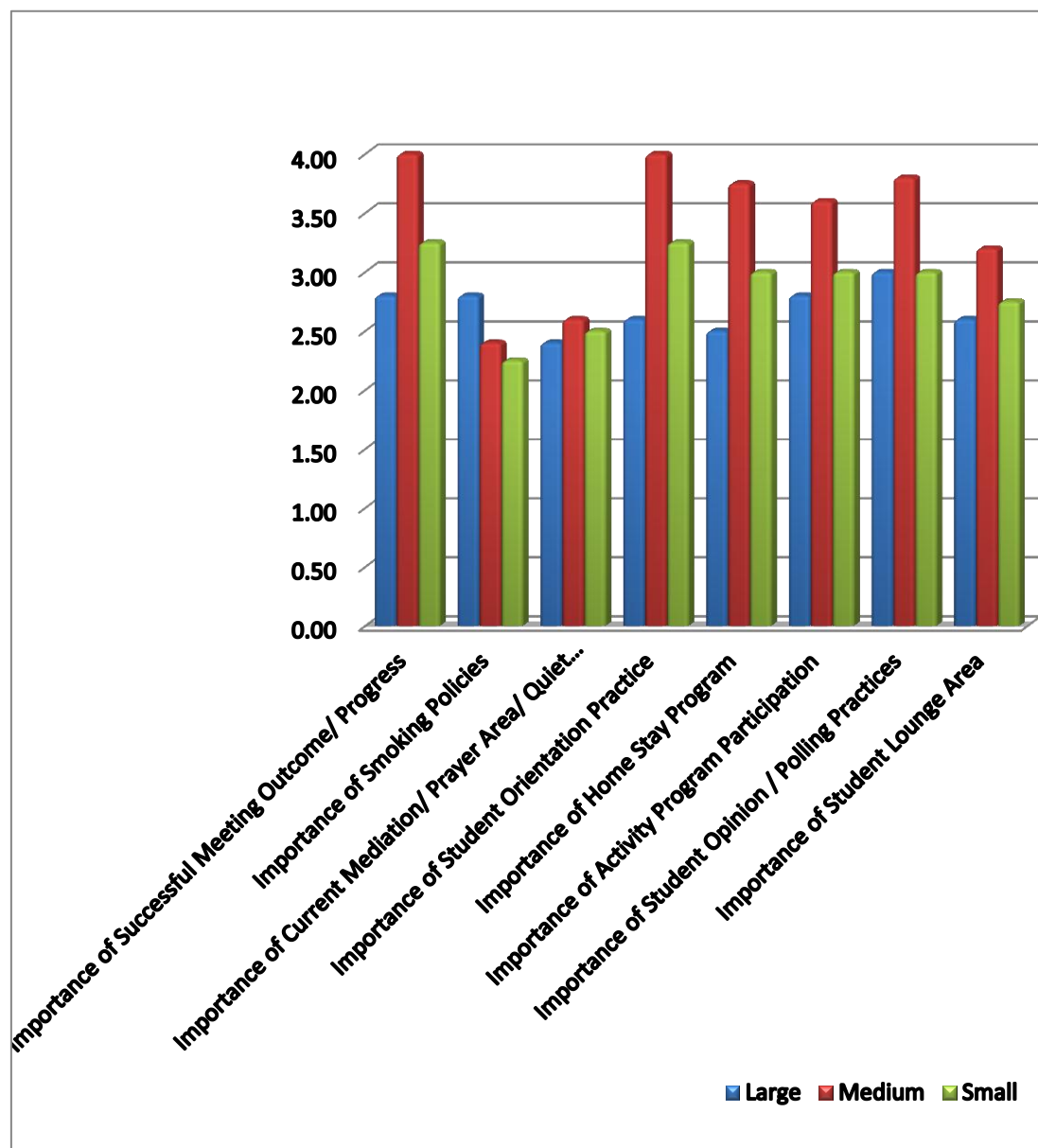


Figure 9. Overall ranking of criteria importance according to program size.

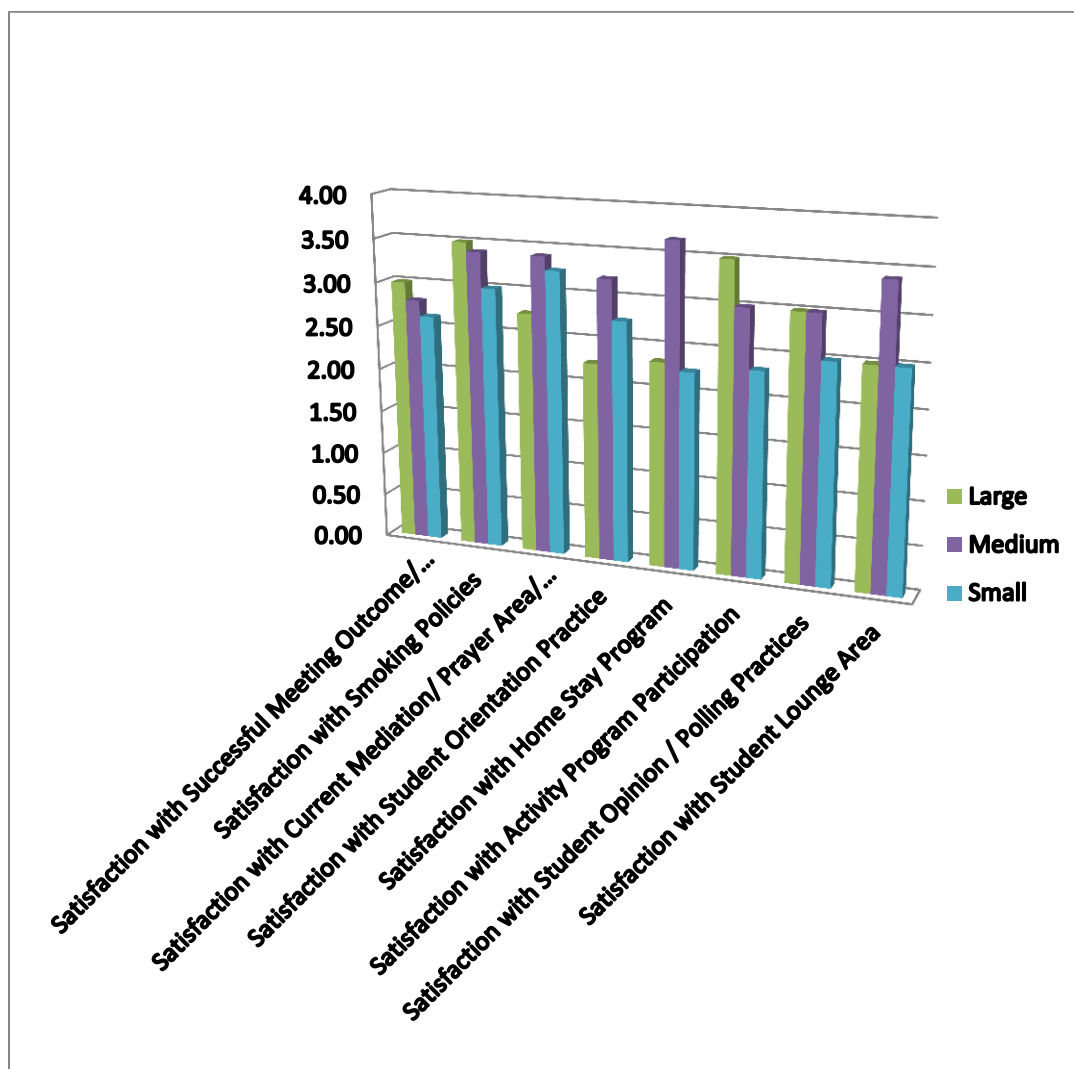


Figure 10. Overall ranking of criteria satisfaction according to program size.

The survey asked participants if, a) they would find it useful to hear from students when dealing with policy items/issues that directly involve students and; b) they worked with students using project based learning in the context of solving student issues. Figure 11 depicts the results from these questions. It appears as though the practice of working with students outside the classroom is not foreign.

Survey participants are asked if they would find it useful to make use of a handbook, outlining the steps for project based learning, for administrative purposes. All responded positively, with one including a comment about wanting a more clear definition of what was meant by “project based learning”.

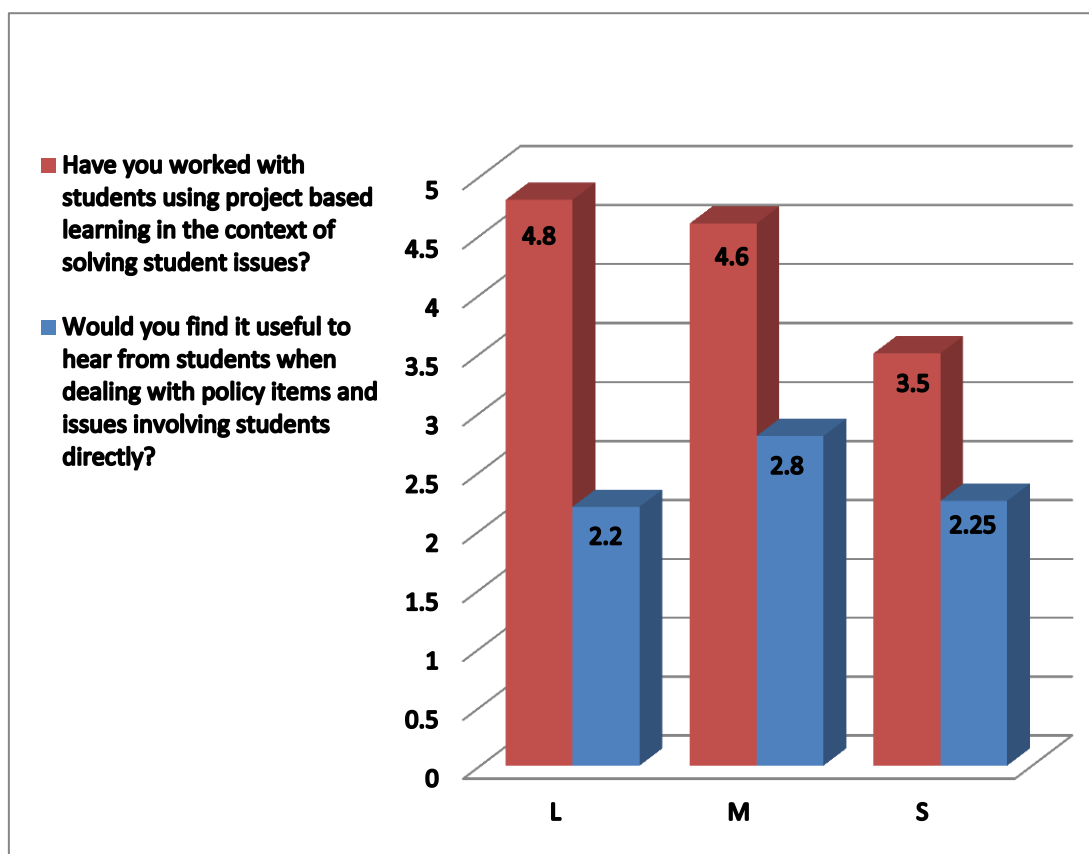


Figure 11. Student involvement in decision making process.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This project set out to address the following question: How useful would a handbook, as an administrative tool for Project-Based Learning, be for administrative professionals of language programs responsible for student services? The feedback indicates that it would prove useful to administrators. It would assist administration in coordinating teams of faculty, administration, students, and staff to collaborate strategically in order to solve, through PBL, otherwise frustrating issues. Collaboration among these teams from various backgrounds can prove to be an invaluable educational approach with long lasting, positive benefits for all participants.

Some of these issues can become time consuming and, at times, the solutions ineffective. The plan to create teams that not only work together, but also learn from one another to achieve a much more efficient and effective problem-solving plan with positive learning outcomes and the creation of engagement and retention for both students and staff, is desirable. The goal of this major research project is to come up with data from the administered needs assessment questionnaire that help to understand if a step by step handbook to assist with forming teams comprised of faculty, administration, students, and staff to assist in problem solving will be efficient and/or effective. Furthermore, the information gathered from survey participants could assist in shaping the focal points of a handbook as a subsequent project to the needs assessment.

### **What?**

In summary, the consensus by the participants is that they could benefit by such a handbook. The research from the literature review gives insight into the benefits of



authenticity of projects, significant components, assisting with motivation and positive outcomes

### **Why?**

The plan to create teams that not only work together, but also learn from one another to achieve a much more efficient and effective problem-solving plan, with positive learning outcomes and the creation of engagement and retention for both students and staff, is desirable. In a language learning setting, the added benefit of learning from a culturally diverse group is another component of this type of PBL.

### **How?**

Upon lengthy review of the needs assessment results, existing literature on project based learning and student benefits suggests that a handbook would be useful for administrative teams to use as a systematic guide. The goal of the handbook will be for the user to lead a team of participants through a process of PBL, for developing strategic, creative, efficient and effective solutions to complicated student service related issues. Additional methods of inquiry can be used to gather further data for this subsequent study. Interviews of both administrators and students would gain further insight into their understanding and opinion on the topic of project based learning and problem solving for student service related issues. As well, focus groups would serve as another source of qualitative data for both students and administrators.

### **Where and who?**

The benefits of using a PBL approach are numerous. Engagement by all participants can prove to be beneficial for the individuals involved, as well as the institution or organization implementing the practice. The research suggests that

engagement can produce a much more enriching experience, thus resulting in retention as another positive outcome.

### **Discussion**

It is exciting to think that the level of satisfaction of students can be raised by a team-based approach to solving student related matters. The profile of an engaged student is the ideal of what each of us could become. If the engaged student is a result of the team-based approach, the possibilities of the engaged administrator, staff, and faculty are limitless. The benefits of this type of satisfaction could be far reaching for positive academic, research, and health focused outcomes.

It is important to note the benefits of transparencies in problem-solving settings. Those who become part of the solution become knowledgeable about the issues, parameters, and solutions.

### **Implications**

In practice, this type of problem-solving approach using PBL can benefit all involved in the process. Satisfaction levels for students, staff, administration, and faculty can be raised. Happier students and employees can result in more efficient and healthier participants overall.

Further engagement and retention statistics could be gathered over time. As well, the mentioned significant components could be tested as an administrative tool to see how they compare to the existing research. More careful consideration of how to show change in environment through participation can be examined to further assist with positive outcomes of this approach.

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### **Appendix: Needs Assessment Questionnaire**

Thank you for participating in this information needs assessment. If you have any questions regarding the completion of this questionnaire, please contact *Stephanie Soccio* by email at [ssoccio@brocku.ca](mailto:ssoccio@brocku.ca) or phone: 905-688-5550 Ext.4021.

#### **INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Questions 1, 10, 12- Place a cross in the relevant box

Questions 2, 3, 4, 6, 11 - Please type your responses in the appropriate space provided.

Questions 5, 7, 8, 9 - Rate each item by placing a cross on the line beside the number that best reflects your response.

Questions 13 – 20 – Please indicate your response with a circle to indicate how often and how important the topics above relate to. The number 1 indicates “not very” and 4 “very” for both.

**Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

—

**Institution:** \_\_\_\_\_

—

**Program**

**Size:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Staff Size:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Student Population:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Job Responsibilities (in summary):**

I work with ESL ☐ Undergraduate ☐ Graduate ☐ Exchange ☐ Students

1. How often does staff meet to discuss student services matters?

Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Bi-weekly ☐ Monthly ☐

2. What is the approximate length of time of these regularly scheduled staff meetings? \_\_\_\_\_ (hour(s), minutes)

3. How many people are in attendance at these meetings? \_

4. Who attends these regularly scheduled meetings related to student services?

5. Do students attend these meetings?

Often \_\_1: \_\_2: \_\_3: \_\_4: \_\_5: \_\_ Never

6. If so, how many students and how often?

7. Would you find it useful to hear from students when dealing with policy items and issues involving students directly?

Often \_\_1: \_\_2: \_\_3: \_\_4: \_\_5: \_\_ Never

8. Have you worked with students using project based learning in the context of solving student issues?

Often\_\_1: \_\_2: \_\_3: \_\_4: \_\_5: \_\_ Never

9. If so, how effective has this been

Often\_\_1: \_\_2: \_\_3: \_\_4: \_\_5: \_\_ Never

10. Do you make use of student opinion in your institution?

Yes ☐ No ☐

11. Do you use a current practice of solving student related matters that you with to briefly explain? If so, please explain in the space provided below.

12. If you were provided a handbook to instruct on how to carry out project based learning to effectively deal with student related concerns, would you find this useful?

Yes ☐ No ☐

	How important is are this to you... with...				How satisfied you			
13. Successful meeting outcome / progress	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
14. Current Smoking Policies	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
15. Current Meditation/Prayer Area / Quiet Space	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
16. Student Orientation Practice	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
17. Homestay Family Program Success	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4



<b>18.</b>	<b>Activity Program Participation</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>19.</b>	<b>Student Opinion and Polling</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>20.</b>	<b>Student Lounge Area</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>